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ELEGANT SHIRTING-

SUCCESSFUL TAKE-OVER OF A SECTION OF THE MARKET WHERE ADVICE TO THE CLIENT PLAYS A BIG ROLE

ROBERT HOWIS



Robert Howis produced his first collection in the middle of the 70's. This was the start of a new textile story. Today, and for quite some time now, his clientele is no longer restricted to the British Isles. Close relations with all Anglo-Saxon markets are a distinguishing feature of the firm's business. The biggest target for the near future is the United States. This Englishman from St. Gall, whose mastery of the Swiss-German dialect is amazing and shows almost no trace of any accent, leaves no doubt that he will also achieve this target. Because in the USA, right now, elegant evening shirts with their "bulletproof" dickies—as they are jokingly referred to in the trade—are enjoying great popularity for parties and festive occasions.

A rich fund of textile experience, a good starting capital

In 1962, Robert Howis (born in 1940) came to Switzerland, armed with a degree in economics. After a short stay in Zurich, he moved to the country's textile capital, St. Gall. To start with, his job consisted in selling Swiss embroideries on English-speaking markets. It was not long before fabrics were added to these; his textile experience increased in depth, and the responsibilities conferred on him expanded from export sales to head of the export and, finally, the sales department. In 1972 came the break and his leap into independence. Robert Howis set up an export agency, concentrating on special embroideries for dress shirts and shirts for parties and festive occasions. In order to round off the assortment better he set up as a converter and started to produce his own plain fabrics to go with them. This was the first step in the now strongly consolidated direction.

Discovery of an interesting market sector

The embroidery manufacturers that Howis represented gave up their business, so that this go-ahead young textile specialist decided to start producing the most interesting articles in the embroidery field himself. "Right at the beginning I made a very interesting discovery," explained Robert Howis, "that the embroidery sector offered very limited scope for a newcomer. It was possible to snatch a "piece of the cake" from the big firms only by producing special articles or making price concessions. Consequently I was on the lookout for textile products which were not distinctly fashionable articles and therefore not extremely short-lived either, but in which advice to the clients played a big role and quantities remained comparatively modest. These last two requirements tended to be avoided by the bigger firms. This is how I found my niche in the market, in which I could steadily develop. In order to give a concrete example: 60% of all articles produced by us, that is to say plissés and edgings, have a repeat size dictated to us by the client. We know exactly how important it is for the shirt manufacturer that the dimensions of the edgings, for example, should be just right. The big mills are not interested in such niggling details."

No restrictions on size of orders

As a converter, Howis Textiles Ltd is not restricted to a specific field of production, but can base its collection on market needs. Thus, for example, for elegant shirt fronts, a wide and varied range of plissés, piqués, woven edgings and embroideries are available. Owing to the designs, the embroideries have a very strong woven look. And it is interesting to note that 6 to 8 shirt fronts can be made from one yard of material.

A big point in this dynamic concern's favour is that it does not stipulate any minimum quantities for its clients. Shirt manufacturers can order 40 or 400 metres, as they like. This does not mean however that the firm only manufactures minute quantities. In the plissés, for example, orders often amount to as much as 5,000 metres or more in a single design. About 95% of the collection is sold in white. Among the novelties, there is a very popular line of edgings with coloured stripes in the direction of the weft. No design is ever sold twice, to two different clients. Exclusivity is taken very seriously. The only exception to this rule is the range of standard designs which are also available from stock. From the point of view of materials, the firm concentrates to a large extent on cotton; only in the embroidery field is cotton mixed with polyester. For autumn 1984, the collection will also include fancy designs on a voile ground; and for spring 1985, fashionable colour-woven shirting fabrics in pure cotton.

Chances for survival of a small firm?

The YES came spontaneously and without hesitation. "I want to stay in my market niche, but extend it a little," said Robert Howis. The articles needing much counselling require the "boss" to maintain very close contacts with the clientele. A small team in the Rorschacherstrasse sees to it that the making of patterns, availability, despatch and administration all run smoothly. The designs are created by a designer free to work on his own, and the client's wishes are converted into concrete designs. Now that the younger generation has rediscovered fashion elegance, the firm's market prospects tend to be on the upward slope. One can see that Robert Howis has a clearcut company policy, without however ever losing sight of market conditions. The flexibility preached and practised really comes into its own here – a quality which in the future too will always be in much demand and greatly prized.